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Violent battle feared as 1,000 travellers are to be evicted from UK's biggest gipsy site

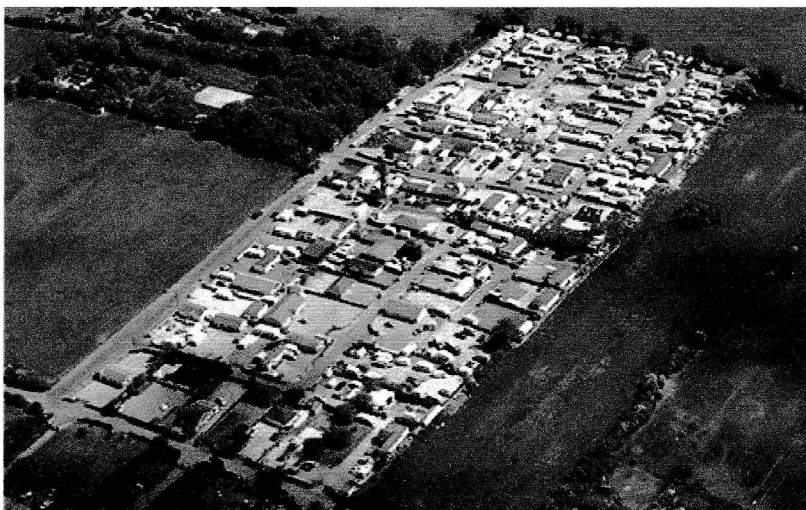
A government agency has offered to rehouse 1,000 travellers when they are evicted from the UK's biggest gipsy site.

By Patrick Sawyer

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It has come to be known as the Battle of Crays Hill.

Standing on Green Belt land and stretching far into the distance, the hundreds of caravans and bungalows which make up Britain's largest and longest-established gipsy and traveller site have long attracted the ire of nearby residents.



Crays Hill encampment Photo: PETER LAWSON/EASTNEWS

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For the past eight years councillors have struggled through the courts to rid their area of the 1,000 travellers who, without planning permission, have made their home on the fields once known as Dale Farm, on the outskirts of Basildon, Essex.

Now the site's inhabitants are preparing for what many fear could be a violent confrontation with bailiffs and council officials determined to evict them.

Families have erected barbed wire fencing and stockpiled planks, rubble and tyres with which to build barricades in the event of any attempts to remove them by force. A banner erected across the gates to the site proclaims: "We won't go".

"They won't be moving us from here without a fight," said one of the site's matriarchs, Mary Anne McCarthy, a 69-year-old Irish-born traveller.

Yet a remarkable intervention by a Government agency has opened up the prospect that the travellers could be given new homes only a mile from Crays Hill.

The Sunday Telegraph can reveal that the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) has offered to rehouse the evicted travellers on land it owns.

Officials from the agency held a secret meeting with Basildon council in August, at which they proposed to turn over some tracts of land in the district owned by the agency for use as one or more authorised traveller sites.

Details of the meeting were later leaked, leading to fears among residents living close to HCA land that the Crays Hill travellers would soon be relocated among them.

Just the other side of the A127 arterial road to Southend, residents are nervously anticipating the prospect of the travellers turning up in their backyard in the event of any eviction from Dale Farm.

"We're all dreading the possibility they may end up moving here," said one such resident.

The battle to rid the area of the Crays Hill encampment has been a tortuous one, exposing the deep-seated tension that exists between 'settled' communities and travelling families who arrive in their midst.

Small numbers of travellers had been living legally at the site since the 1960s, but in recent years a marked increase in their numbers – the majority moving in without planning permission – has led to complaints about anti-social behaviour and petty crime.

At every stage the travellers have challenged Basildon council's attempts to remove them, employing batteries of solicitors – largely paid for by Legal Aid – and bolstered by advice from the human rights activists who regularly visit.

When the council tried to send in bailiffs, the travellers went to the High Court where they won an eleventh-hour reprieve to stop the eviction. In Jan 2009 the Appeal Court reversed that decision and told the council it could go ahead with the removals.

This summer Basildon announced that it was preparing to issue new notices, giving the travellers 28 days to quit. In a preliminary move, seven families from the nearby Hovefields site were forced out.

Council officials began to believe the end was in sight, having already run up £1 million in legal bills with estimates that the total cost, including the restoration of Dale Farm to Green Belt condition, will top £3.5 million.

On top of this, the policing bill for evicting the travellers could reach £10 million if the situation turns violent.

But just weeks before eviction notices were due to be issued, the HCA – a quango which survived this month's Government cull – came forward with its rehousing offer.

Encouraged by the turn of events, the travellers are now preparing to submit planning applications for HCA land across the A127, just over a mile from Dale Farm.

One such plot, at Pound Lane in Basildon, is currently a mixture of open fields and woodland, overlooked by the picturesque village church of St Nicholas and bordered by a row of semi detached houses and bungalows.

Here, comments from furious residents illustrate the intractability of the problem, both at Crays Hill and similar flashpoints around the country.

Rob Cresswell, 34, said: "I provided site accommodation for the bailiffs and security carrying out the eviction at Hovefields and now they could end up literally in my back yard. We're all scared they'll just come and take what they want."

Emma Cracknell, 21, a sales assistant, said: "This is a nice street and we don't want it overrun by travellers. We look after our homes here, it's a friendly neighbourhood and we don't want that to change."

Another long-standing Pound Lane resident, a 69-year-old retired credit controller who has lived in the street for decades, said: "What is the point of moving them from Dale Farm only to create a new problem here?"

"I know everyone has to have somewhere to live, but frankly we don't want travellers here. They'll ruin what are still green fields and bring traffic and noise with them, never mind the social problems."

For their part the Crays Hill travellers say all they want is somewhere to raise their children away from the prejudice of 'settled' people.

They have vowed to defy their imminent eviction – unless they are found an alternative site of an equal size, allowing them to stay together as one community.

Mrs McCarthy, who has lived on the site since 2002 and now shares it with her seven children, 20 grandchildren and four great grandchildren, said: "If it comes to an eviction we'll put up a good fight. We'll put up resistance."

"The council says there are too many travellers in Basildon so they want to evict us and make us go away. But they couldn't say and do that about black and Asian people, could they? So why us?"

She added: "Wherever we go people complain before they even get to know us. Why can't we stay here instead of being forced to move and creating a problem somewhere else?"

"This is our home, our community. We don't want to be split up and forced to move to sites around the country. We don't want to be a burden on anyone."

"We've installed gas and electricity here ourselves. Our men go out and work. We don't allow our young girls to sleep around or get drunk. But people are immediately prejudiced against us."

Grattan Puxon, a travellers campaigner who represents the Crays Hill families, claimed officials had encouraged the travellers to begin submitting planning applications for HSA land at Pound Lane and nearby Gardiners Lane.

Mr Puxon said: "At the meeting the council made it clear it did not want to see more sites developed in Basildon, but the agency has advised us to draw up the applications."

"Plans have been drawn up for a 20-pitch site at Pound Lane, Laindon, which will go in shortly."

"As a result of the Hovefields eviction we are also trying to prepare applications for two smaller sites in the Gardiners Lane area. We have to find agency land in the area which is currently unoccupied."

The outcome depends in part on the ruling in an ongoing test case at Southend County Court, where four travellers argued last week that Basildon council should offer them a chance to continue their traditional way of life.

John Sheridan, 33, Barbara O'Brien, and John and Mary Flynn, 77 and 79, have rejected the council's offer of "bricks and mortar" homes, and say they will be homeless if they are evicted from Crays Hill.

If the court ruling goes in their favour next month, the council would then be obliged to find another way to provide for them.

The HCA, formerly the Commission for New Towns, was formed in 2008 to oversee the construction of affordable homes and revive areas with run down housing.

It controls over £1 billion worth of land and property assets around Britain. Last year it spent over £5 billion and it aims to reclaim over 1,042 hectares of brownfield land by next year.

It has defended its decision to offer land to Basildon council, saying it had a responsibility to help local authorities meet the "housing needs and priorities" of people from all sections of the community.

A spokesman for the HCA said: "We have put forward to the council all land we own in the Basildon district as potential alternative provision for the travellers at Hovefields, Wickford, and Dale Farm."

"Discussions are still ongoing on the suitability of any sites to take forward. One of the key aims of the HCA is to enable opportunities for people to have homes they can afford in places where they want to live."

"This includes providing sites for that section of the gipsy and traveller community who want to preserve their tradition and live in a caravan."

Should Basildon take up the offer, the HCA would retain ownership of the land and offer it to the council on a long-lease basis. A housing association would manage the pitches and collect rent and a service charge from the travellers.

However, the council pulled out of the talks with the HCA after details of the secret discussions were leaked.

Tony Ball, leader of the council, said the authority would not now provide new land for the Crays Hill travellers unless other districts in Essex were prepared to do the same.

"We've been working with the HCA and the travellers to find alternative sites throughout the county and not just in Basildon," he said.

"We have 100 authorised sites in our district and another 100 unauthorised sites and we will only be willing to consider making further provision for travellers if other councils in Essex are willing to do so as well."

Meanwhile, Essex Police confirmed it has applied for money from the Government to help pay for the eviction. A spokesman for the force said: "Essex Police will continue to work with Basildon Council and its appropriate agents.

"In doing so, there will be a financial costs as well as the abstraction of officers from other duties. We have made a bid to the Government for funding."

Additional reporting by Michael Howie

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